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ABSTRACT

Fifteen reasons for the current negative status of the social studies as a curriculum in schools of the United States are provided. The 15 reasons include (1) lack of a well-planned, issue-centered, skill-oriented social studies curriculum program, (2) overdependence upon history and neglect of other social sciences, (3) lack of a minimum set of essential national social studies goals, (4) decline of the social studies from the organizational center of the elementary school program, (5) lack of conviction by administrators of the function of social studies, (6) discouragement by the failure of certain programs, (7) authoritarian image of the social studies teachers to the student, (8) weak role of the social studies department chairpersons and supervisors, (9) failure to gather and use parental and Public support, (10) lack of valid social studies assessment and evaluation procedures, (11) lack of humane classroom environments to motivate and interest students, (12) lack of sound research in the field of social studies education, (13) overemphasis of the content in social studies at the expense of skill development, (14) isolation of the school and classroom from the real world of the community, and (15) lack of firm conviction about the ethical values which social studies teach. (Author/DE)

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THE SOCIAL STUDIES IN THEIR GOLDEN YEARS: AN INHOUSE MEDICAL A*

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Depending upon the birth date accepted, the social studies are n. 55 and 75 years old. In this case I wish to serve as a professional M.D. and to check on the health of the field. How hardy is it? Is it ready for retirement? Is rejuvenation possible if its status is poor? Initial prognosis does not bode well from an observational standpoint; will an examination in depth provide an even less promising profile?

My presentation is in response to conditions that do not have to be detailed for supervisors. I share your deep concerns for from across the country I find declining enrollments, drops in social studies requirements, cutbacks in personnel, and the like. This cancerous growth first became apparent in Washington, D. C. last year, with the threat to do away with the social studies entirely, and now from student ratings to historians we are once again under attack as purveyors of social slush. I have carefully reviewed the situation and find the following fifteen factors all responsible to some degree for the current miasma.

1. We social studies educators have never mounted a true social studies program — one that is well planned, sequenced, timely, issue-centered, and skill-oriented: a decision-making curriculum of socio-civic learnings and experiences. You supervisors know that this just does not exist. A material contribution to this key weakness has been our failure to produce teachers who can accomplish such a curriculum.

2. There has been an overdependence upon history and certain social science disciplines and a neglect of others, such as economics and social psychology, in the shaping of our social studies offerings. Additionally, the traditional social

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* An abridgement of an address by the Past President of the NCSS before the Social Studies Supervisors Association meeting in Atlanta, November 25, 1975.

sciences do not by themselves provide fully adequate avenues for experience and action in a motivating social studies program; integration with other disciplines and other aspects of life are fundamental in the formation of a complete program of social education.

3. We are also handicapped by our failure to establish a minimum set of essential national goals which will clearly establish the centrality of the social studies in the general education of children and youth. Through a lack of wise selectivity, we have promoted the idea that almost any learnings in our field are of equal value. Mini-courses, electives, and do-your-own-thing offerings abound. I do not want to negate the value of some of these, but each should build on and contribute to the attainment of the fundamental goals. We will continue to drift in seeming aimlessness until we can agree upon a central core of mandated, structured, and articulated learnings.

4. Particularly tragic is the decline of the social studies from the organizational center of the elementary school program. (Of course, in many places social studies have never attained such a position.) Unfortunately, current back-to-basic trends, elementary school testing programs, and a seemingly growing agreement on the part of many elementary school teachers all contribute to a threatening attitude that the social studies are relatively unimportant; thus, what should be the heart of elementary school units is in danger of elimination or receives at best scant attention.

5. We have failed to convince administrators of the unique needs and functions of the social studies. The continuing frequent assignment of poorly or inadequately prepared personnel to instruct in our field is one of the greatest causes of our ineffectiveness. Again far too minimal credentialing requirements have contributed here; I can't imagine, for example, teachers being allowed to handle most social studies courses at the secondary level or being permitted to offer social studies in the elementary school when they have had a single or perhaps no course in human geography.

6. We have also been plagued by a bandwagon-panacea syndrome. Anxious to gain motivation, we seem to have an extraordinary tendency to grasp at untested approaches for which we, the students, and the community are not ready, wherein we make mistakes which backfire, damage our image, and then retreat to what the pupils have long reacted against, thus further inciting them. Having burned our fingers, we often then become afraid to do the rethinking and reorganizing which would help a new approach succeed. Recent examples in this category include team teaching which has usually deteriorated into take-turn teaching or the unassessed and uncontrolled gaming binge through which we may actually hinder the attainment of several of our more important social studies aims.

7. Too often social studies mentors cast authoritarian images. In this mistake we reinforce pupil attitudes about the hypocracy of the system which aims to propagandize them. The school does have the handicap of being a custodial institution, but frequently this supposed workshop of civic education provides a most unhappy example of undemocratic behavior and organization. The more experienced I become, the more certain I am of the over-riding importance of the image we cast. Teachers and schools must model the concerned and responsible qualities that characterize the citizen in a free society.

8. We must act to strengthen the roles of departmental chairpersons and of supervisors. How often are departmental chairpersons anything more than funnels for book orders? And how many supervisors are afraid to supervise? The leadership positions of these roles must be upgraded and both should be instituting vigorous in-service education efforts.

9. We have neglected the informing and co-opting of essential parental and public support. We have also failed to reach key agencies and organizations in our communities. Thoroughly knowledgeable lay leaders and groups can be of tremendous aid in furthering our efforts. If we are not convincing advocates for the social studies, these individuals and groups can be serious stumbling blocks.

Under such circumstances we become vulnerable to outside pressures and have too often had to bow to controls and censorship which limit the right of the pupils to learn.

10. Our failures to define our purposes clearly have confounded the extremely difficult problems of evaluation in our area; but the old bromide that true social studies assessment can only be proved in later life will hold no longer. We must be able to prove the efficacy of our programs. Our captive audiences and their parents are ever less quiet and accepting. We now must give prime attention to the measuring of attainments in our field so we really know if it and what we do make any difference.

11. We truly need to work on the environment for learning within our classrooms; of course, we share this challenge with our colleagues in other areas. But evidence continues to point to the facts that our schoolrooms lack a humane, guidance orientation and that we do comparatively little to truly individualize and motivate. This is a particularly serious lack at the high school level. Of all classes, the social studies should be warm, understanding, and success-oriented — indeed, of all things, <u>social</u>!

12. Our problems are also related to the comparative lack of sound research in the field of social studies education. It must be admitted that we do not have adequate proof for many aspects of what we are trying to attain. This certainly further complicates our explaining and defending. I personally believe that a major responsibility for every supervisor is to encourage and facilitate research efforts by teachers in their districts and urge you to help mount significant studies which may help us prove the efficacy of our programs.

13. The content-fact emphasis in the social studies must be replaced by a long overlooked skills element. To neglect the social studies skills is to neglect the fundamentals of our field. The command of basic competencies from graph and map interpretation or group work skills to observational and analytical qualities

or expressive abilities are just a sampling of a myriad of social studies skills that have to be built into the social studies program. If we can really become process-oriented, it will harbor one of the most significant improvements that has characterized the field since its inception.

14. For too long the school has been highly isolated. Independent and small group studies that move into the real world of the community, state, and region are long overdue. I am pleased to see parents and pupils breaking down the castle walls and filling in the moats. The concept of the school as an island has been years in dying; but it has helped maintain a remote social studies program where students have little chance to apply or act upon their studies and conclusions. The school as a hub of the community can prove to be a troublesome and boatrocking institution; but this is where we can meet the rising demands for relevance. Our failure to systematically incorporate and use our immediate milieu is one of the major factors in turning youth from our field.

15. Lastly, I wish to challenge the relativism that we have let sap our "convincability." In the name of objectivity, we have allowed a kind of neutral leukemia to take hold in our schoolrooms wherein the boys and girls are lead to wonder if we stand for anything and if anything is worth standing for. I am of the opinion that there are principles we must extend; there are sanctions we must live by. Integrity, justice, and compassion are but three examples; I maintain that these and other such basic qualities need to be carefully built back into our programs. The failure to maintain ethical, value-oriented emphases in the social studies where youth may come to understand why they hold certain beliefs inviolate, how to work to extend them, as well as gain the strength to stick by them when need be, may, indeed, for young people and the nation, let alone ourselves, be the greatest of our failures in mounting a viable program of social education that is worthy of maintenance.

Need I report any more? If my diagnoses are correct, how much for the rest of our fifteen afflictions are evident therein. I trust this has not been an anticipatory post-mortem. But the proof of that will become evident over the next several years and it will rest heavily upon persons such as yourselves, those in key leadership positions. Certainly some beneficial, innovative, and somewhat massive actions are called for at this point from the local to the national levels. I would be happy to share my views about these remedial treatments on another occasion; but I am sorry for today, our office hour is over.